UNITED NATIONS TRUCE SUPERVISION ORGANIZATION (UNTSO)

Headquarters
Government House, Jerusalem

Duration
June 1948 - to date

Maximum strength
572 (1948)

Current strength
293 military observers (30 June 1991)

Fatalities
28 (30 June 1991)

Chief of Staff
Major-General Hans Christensen (Finland)

Historical Background

From its early days, the United Nations has been concerned with the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East. Since 1948, there have been five full-fledged wars directly connected with the conflict, and five United Nations peace-keeping operations have been established in the region. Of these, three are still deployed.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has its origins in the problem of Palestine, which was brought before the United Nations early in 1947. At the time, Palestine was a Territory administered by the United Kingdom under a Mandate from the League of Nations, with a population of about 2 million, two thirds of whom were Arabs and one third, Jews.

In November 1947, the General Assembly endorsed a plan for the partition of the Territory, providing for the creation of an Arab State and a Jewish State, with Jerusalem to be placed under international status. The plan was not accepted by the Palestinian Arabs and Arab States.

On 14 May 1948, the United Kingdom relinquished its Mandate over Palestine and the State of Israel was proclaimed. On the following day, the Palestinian Arabs, assisted by Arab States, opened hostilities against Israel.

UNITED NATIONS

Establishment of UNTSO

On 29 May, the Security Council, in its resolution 50 (1948), called for a cessation of hostilities in Palestine and decided that the truce should be supervised by the United Nations Mediator, with the assistance of a group of military observers. This resolution formed the basis for the establishment of the first United Nations peace-keeping operation which became known as the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization. The first group of observers arrived in the region between 11 and 14 June 1948 and were immediately deployed in Palestine and some of the Arab countries.

UNTSO's Operations

While UNTSO was initially used in supervising the original truce of 1948, its function was radically altered in 1949 with the conclusion of four General Armistice Agreements between Israel and the four neighbouring Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria). Its main responsibility then was to assist the parties in supervising the application and observance of those Agreements. Its headquarters was established at Government House in Jerusalem, where it remains today.

Following the wars of 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982, the functions of the UNTSO observers changed in the light of changing circumstances, but they remained on the cease-fire lines, often under fire, performing an invaluable service as go-betweens and often preventing isolated incidents from escalating into larger conflicts. Following the 1967 war, UNTSO established two cease-fire observation operations, in the Israel-Syria sector and in the Suez Canal zone. In 1972 a similar operation was set up in southern Lebanon. When UN peace-keeping forces were later deployed, in the Sinai in 1973, on the Golan Heights in 1974 and in southern Lebanon in 1978, UNTSO observers were attached to the new forces to assist them in their operations.

Today, UNTSO observers continue to be assigned to the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights in the Israel-Syria sector. Operating as an integral part of UNDOF, they man eleven observation posts located near the area of operation of the Force and in the vicinity of the lines on both sides. They also conduct the fortnightly inspections of the areas of limitation in armaments and forces provided for under the disengagement agreement of 1974. This group of UNTSO observers is formed into Observer Group Golan (OGG). There is also a separate UNTSO unit, the Observer Detachment Damascus (ODD), which performs support functions for OGG.

In the Israel-Lebanon sector, UNTSO observers who have been detailed to assist the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) form the Observer Group Lebanon (OGL). This Group, which is under operational control of the UNIFIL commander, maintains five observation posts along the Lebanese side of the Armistice Demarcation Line and operate four mobile teams in parts of the UNIFIL area of operation, including those that are under Israeli control and where UNIFIL infantry units are not deployed.

UNTSO continues to maintain its presence in the Egypt-Israel sector, where its observers are organized as Observer Group Egypt (OGE). The Group operates six outposts in the Sinai and an outpost at Ismailia in the Suez Canal zone, and conducts patrols in most parts of the peninsula. OGE headquarters in Cairo maintains liaison for UNTSO with the Egyptian authorities.

There is also a small group of UNTSO observers in Beirut, Lebanon, and a liaison office in Amman, Jordan.

Other Activities

Over the years, UNTSO has also made available its personnel, often at very short notice, to assist in the setting up of other United Nations peace-keeping operations not connected with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Such a rapid deployment of experienced and highly trained UN observers has been essential to the success of many operations. UNTSO personnel were invaluable in setting up the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) in 1960, the United Nations Yemen Observation Mission (UNYOM) in 1963, the United Nations Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan (UNGOMAP), the United Nations Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG) in 1988 and the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM) in 1991.

Composition of UNTSO

As of 30 June 1991, there were 293 military observers provided by 19 contributing countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Soviet Union, United States.

Financial Aspects

Since its establishment in 1948, UNTSO has been financed from the regular budget of the United Nations. Its costs are therefore assessed as part of each biennial programme budget. As of 31 December 1989, UNTSO's total expenditures amounted to approximately $310.5 million. For the biennium 1990-1991, the resources approved by the General Assembly for UNTSO's budget were $47.4 million.

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